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CONSCIOUSNESS OF ONESELF AS SUBJECT

Quassim Cassam

Béatrice Longuenesse opens her brilliant and illuminating account of Kant's conception of self-consciousness with the following statement:

Kant was especially interested in a specific kind of self-consciousness, the kind that finds conceptual formulation in the proposition 'I think'. In thinking 'I think', he claimed, we give conceptual expression to our consciousness of being engaged in a mental activity we take to be our own: the activity of combining and comparing representations according to logical rules.... Now, in being conscious of ourselves in this way, Kant claimed, we are not conscious of ourselves as an object among other objects in the world. I may, on other grounds, be conscious of myself as an object, indeed as a physical object, a particular entity among other entities located in space and time. But.... the consciousness I have of myself, as the *subject* of thinking (the consciousness I have of myself in being conscious that I think), is not a consciousness of myself as any kind of *object* at all, whether material or immaterial (2017: 1).

Here we see some of the main elements of the view of consciousness of oneself as subject that Longuenesse attributes to Kant. There is the idea that consciousness of oneself as subject, as expressed in the proposition 'I think', consists in consciousness of being engaged in a mental activity. Call this the *consciousness of mental activity thesis*, or COMA for short. Then there is the idea that understood in this way, consciousness of oneself as the subject of thinking is not consciousness of oneself as any kind of object, material or immaterial. For Longuenesse's Kant, consciousness of oneself as subject and as object are distinct. Call this the *distinctness thesis*. However, the point of this thesis is not to deny that each of us can be aware of himself or herself as a physical object, or to suggest that consciousness of oneself as a thinking subject and as a physical object are unconnected. For Longuenesse consciousness of oneself as thinking is 'as a matter of empirical fact rather than as a matter of a priori argument, intimately

connected to awareness of one's own body' (2017: 234). Call this the *connection thesis*. I want to raise some questions about each of the theses I have extracted from Longuenesse's opening statement.

Starting with COMA, what is the nature of the mental activity that is at issue here and what is the nature of our awareness of it? The activity is *binding* and the consciousness that is at issue is 'a consciousness of being engaged in an activity of binding one's representations in such a way as to come up with concepts, combined in judgments, connected in inferential patterns' (2017: 4). 'Binding', or 'binding for thinking' (2017: 29), is Longuenesse's gloss on what Kant calls 'synthesizing' or 'combining'. She suggests, plausibly, that Kant's theory of synthesis 'bears an interesting relation to the contemporary "binding" problem in cognitive psychology' (2017: 14 note 5). However, there are some important differences between binding in the psychological sense and Kantian synthesis, and these differences raise questions about COMA. As John Campbell notes, 'there is much converging evidence that different properties of an object, such as colour, shape, motion, size, or orientation are processed in different processing streams (2002: 30). This means that the brain has the problem of 'reassembling individual objects' from this information, and 'we do not have perception of an individual object until this Binding Problem has been solved, and various simple sensory properties have been put together as properties of a single object' (Campbell 2002: 30-31). Understood in this way, however, the binding problem is a problem for the brain rather than for the perceiving subject. People aren't normally conscious of the process or processes by means of which individual objects are reassembled by their brains, and it is an empirical question how their brains operate. There are many different hypotheses about how the brain solves the binding problem, and it is for empirical science rather than armchair philosophy to determine how the problem is actually solved.

If the binding to which Longuenesse refers is the binding described by cognitive psychologists then the idea that we are conscious of the activity of binding our representations is problematic in at least two different ways: there is no such activity and no such consciousness. Binding is a sub-personal *process* or *mechanism* rather than a mental activity, something that a person or subject of experience *does*, and there is in the normal course of events no consciousness of this process. Why should it be supposed that armchair philosophical reflection is able to tell us very much about the nature of this activity? Perhaps, in that case, it would be more charitable to interpret Longuenesse as suggesting not that her ‘binding for thinking’ *is* what cognitive psychologists ‘binding’ but only analogous to it. On this reading, Kantian binding is a genuine mental activity that is distinct from binding in the psychological sense. But then one might wonder what justification there is for positing two such processes working in parallel, one consciously and the other sub-personally. And if there are two such processes or activities, how exactly are they related?

At various points in her discussion, Longuenesse attributes to Kant the view that the consciousness that is at issue in COMA and thinking more generally is perceptual: ‘For Kant, perceiving that I think is being affected by my own (active) thinking, just as I can be affected by external objects’ (2017: 86). Whether or not there is consciousness of binding there is such a thing as being aware of one’s own active thinking. What is more doubtful is whether it is right to regard such awareness as perceptual. On the face of it, one’s awareness of one’s own actions, including one’s mental actions, is nothing like one’s perceptual awareness of external objects, and this has led some to characterise action awareness as non-observational rather than observational. Indeed, Longuenesse herself quotes a passage from Kant in which he appears to describe a form of ‘pure action-awareness’, that is, ‘a consciousness of being engaged in the act of thinking (and synthesizing: transcendental imagination) just in virtue of being engaged in that act’ (2017: 86). This non-perceptual consciousness is different from the experience or

determinate perception of ‘the temporal succession of my mental states’ (2017: 2017). But perceptual awareness of the succession of one’s own mental states, even if there is such a thing, would not amount to perceiving that I think because the occurrence of a succession of mental states does not constitute thinking and is distinct from the supposed activity of combining and comparing representations according to logical rules.

As it turns out, however, these questions about the extent to which our consciousness of binding our representations is perceptual are largely beside the point because it turns out that Longuenesse herself regards consciousness of the act of binding as ‘mostly implicit’ (2017: 81). She argues that there is neither phenomenal nor intentional consciousness of our activity of binding representations, and that ‘we are conscious of the binding activity mostly through its results’ (2017: 181). More generally, ‘it is true for Kant that we become conscious of the mental activities that have gone into our cognitive achievements *by being conscious of their results*, by being conscious of those achievements themselves’ (2017: 191). The most striking result of the activity of binding is consciousness of objects of perception as abiding, as capable of continuing to exist unperceived. This is the cognitive achievement our consciousness of which implies consciousness of the binding that went into it.

If this is what Longuenesse intends then several questions now arise. First, what is the sense in which we become conscious of mental activities by being conscious of their results? Consider this simple analogy: a complex range of culinary activities went into the preparation of the dish on my dinner plate but I’m not conscious of these activities by being conscious of their result – the dish. If I am an experienced cook I might be able to tell, on tasting the dish, how it was made but even in this scenario my knowledge of how the dish was made is strictly inferential; I am not conscious, not even implicitly, of the culinary activities that resulted in the dish in front of me. The perceptual case is even clearer: not only am I not implicitly conscious of the binding activities that are or were responsible for my perceptual consciousness of abiding

objects, perception of objects reveals little or nothing about how it came about. The idea that perception of objects presupposes binding is a sophisticated empirical hypothesis based on a range of background assumptions about the nature of perception. The positing of specific binding parameters can only be justified by reference to empirical psychology. Longuenesse is therefore right to insist that Kant's transcendental psychology is 'not unrelated to more empirical forays into the workings of the mind' (2017: 175). Whether these empirical forays support Kant's detailed story seems doubtful and in any event can't be settled without a more detailed investigation than is possible here. However, the key point for present purposes is this: if there is no consciousness of the mental activity of binding then the 'I think' cannot give conceptual expression to this consciousness. A different account of the role of 'I think' is needed.

Longuenesse has a great deal to say about the 'I think'. Imagine judging that the object visible in the far distance is a tree and being asked whether one is sure of that. One response might be 'Yes, I think that is a tree'. For Longuenesse, the 'I' in this response refers to the thinker of the current thought while the predicate 'think this is a tree' 'is a concept that refers to the activity of reviewing reasons for asserting this is a tree' (2017: 27). It's not clear that this is right. For a start, although the question 'are you sure?' might lead one to review the reasons for judging that the object is a tree, 'I think that's a tree' sounds like a hesitant statement of the *conclusion* of one's reasoning rather than a reference to the reasoning itself. Leaving that aside, Longuenesse goes on to remark that 'think this is a tree' is asserted of oneself 'partly on the basis of information concerning one's location and one's physical properties' and that in this case 'being embodied and located becomes part of the concept one has of oneself' (2017: 27). However, she argues, 'this does not mean that a conception of oneself as spatially located and embodied is a condition for the very use of "I" in the argument place of one's judgment' (2017: 27).

How can that be? How being embodied and located be part of one's self-concept when self-ascribing the predicate 'think this is a tree' but the conception of oneself as located and embodied *not* be a condition for the use of "I"? To make her point Longuenesse uses a different example, the example of painstakingly going through a proof and concluding 'I think the proof is valid'. Here the use of 'I' is 'supported *not* by my consciousness of my body, but by my consciousness of checking the steps and demonstrating the validity of the proof' (2017: 28). Consciousness of oneself as a physical object doesn't come into it. When I think 'I think the proof is valid' I am conscious of myself '*as a thinker*' and 'need not be conscious of myself in any other capacity' (2017: 184). Consciousness of myself as thinking subject and as an object are, in this sense, quite distinct, and this is the point of the distinctness thesis. Indeed, for Longuenesse, not only is consciousness of oneself as a thinker *distinct* from consciousness of oneself as an embodied entity; it is also independently intelligible and so doesn't *require* the consciousness of oneself as such an entity.

Even if Longuenesse is right about 'I think the proof is valid', it doesn't follow that the 'I' in 'I think that's a tree' doesn't need to be conceived of as spatially located and embodied. The two cases are, on the face of it quite different. Reflection on the validity of a proof is a piece of abstract thinking about an "object" to which one need not be perceptually related. The proof can be written down on a piece of paper but needn't be. In contrast, reflection on whether a perceptually presented object is a tree is, by definition, reflection on an object to which one is perceptually related. In thinking 'I think this is a tree' one has a specific tree in mind. If the tree in question is one that one can perceive then the 'this' in 'I think this is a tree' is functioning as a perceptual demonstrative. In visual perception objects are (at least normally) presented as spatially related to the subject, who is thereby also presented to himself or herself as spatially located. In tactile perception one is also presented to oneself as embodied. However, the self that perceives the tree *is* the self that is thinking about the tree, and is conscious of doing so. If one

is aware of the *perceiving* self as located and embodied then one is, to that extent, aware of the *thinking* self as located and embodied. They are manifestly the same self. However, the self that thinks ‘This is a tree’ is presumably also the self that thinks ‘The proof is valid’. Again, they are the same self. In that case, how can this self not conceive of the ‘I’ that thinks ‘The proof is valid’ as located and embodied, given that it is aware of the same ‘I’ that thinks ‘This is a tree’ as located and embodied?

This brings out a peculiarity in how Longuenesse argues for the distinctness thesis. This thesis is at its most plausible in relation to thoughts about logical objects (such as proofs) and at its least plausible in relation to thoughts about ordinary objects of perception (such as trees). Consciousness of oneself as the subject of thinking is not consciousness of oneself as any kind of object in the case of thinking that is not tied to perception. Consciousness of thinking that is tied to perception does require consciousness of the subject of thinking as some kind of object – a corporeal object. In arguing for the distinctness thesis Longuenesse shifts from one case to the other and draws attention to the minimal and austere conception of the thinking self that is required to sustain purely abstract thinking about logical objects. However, much our thinking is not purely abstract and is sustained by perception, as in the case of perceptual-demonstrative thinking. The thinking self that can supposedly manage without any awareness of itself as embodied is also a perceiving self, and the perceiving self must be aware of itself as embodied. The ‘thinking self’ and the ‘perceiving self’ are one and the same self and that self is aware of itself as a bodily self.

Longuenesse agrees that consciousness of oneself as thinking is intimately connected to awareness of one’s own body. According to the connection thesis, this is a matter of empirical fact rather than a priori argument but it’s difficult to understand how this can be so. Consider this argument which Longuenesse takes from Kant’s critique of rational psychology in the Third Paralogism:

[T]he only way we are objectively justified in believing ourselves to be entities that persist through time, and the only way we are able to track our own existence through time, is by adopting a third-person standpoint on our own existence as the existence of an embodied entity. We cannot derive any objectively justified belief in our persisting existence from our mere consciousness of ourselves in thinking. In other words, Kant's argument, as I understand it, is a strong defense of the distinction, but also the intimate connection, between consciousness of oneself in thinking and consciousness of oneself as an embodied entity (2017: 234).

There is nothing particularly empirical about this argument. It isn't an empirical thesis that our mere consciousness of ourselves in thinking can't justify the belief in our persisting existence. The considerations in support of the claim that consciousness of ourselves as embodied entities is what is needed to justify such a belief are a priori rather than empirical. But why does consciousness of oneself in thinking require the justified belief that one is an entity that persists? Because thinking takes time. In running through the steps of a complex proof the identity of the self that entertains the premises with the self that draws the conclusion is presupposed. If the time at which the conclusion is drawn is later than the time at which the premises are entertained it follows that the self that conceives of itself as drawing a conclusion from previously entertained premises must implicitly be conceiving of itself as a persisting self. So if the conception of oneself as persisting requires consciousness of oneself as a bodily entity then the consciousness of oneself in thinking requires, at least implicitly, the consciousness of oneself as a bodily entity.

What is striking about this argument is not just that it establishes what looks like an a priori connection between consciousness of oneself as thinking and consciousness of oneself as an embodied entity but also that it applies to consciousness of thinking generally, and not just consciousness of thinking about objects of perception. A competent I-thinker will think of

himself or herself as persisting, at least for some time, rather than as a momentary existent. By Longuenesse's lights, such a thinker will also be conscious of himself or herself as an embodied entity and, in this sense, 'as an object'. The significance of this can be brought out by turning to the Preface and Acknowledgments of *I, Me, Mine*, where Longuenesse represents her book as written partly in response to my 1997 book *Self and World*. In that book I argued that awareness of oneself 'qua subject' and 'as an object' are compatible. Following Merleau-Ponty I argued that in being aware of oneself as a bodily self, one is aware of oneself as a 'subject-object', that is, as both a subject of thinking and experience and as a corporeal object among corporeal objects.

In a paper published in 2006 Longuenesse defended the view that 'consciousness of oneself *as the subject* of thought is not and cannot be consciousness of oneself *as an object*' (2006: 284). In *I, Me, Mine* she continues to insist, following Kant, that there is a 'fundamental difference between the self-consciousness proper to the thinking subject in the course of her thinking, and her consciousness of herself as an object in the world' (2017: xii). In the light of this, what is the significance of allowing that the consciousness of oneself in thinking requires the consciousness of oneself as a bodily entity? There remains this crucial difference between Longuenesse's view and mine: on my view, as Longuenesse accurately represents it, it is possible for there to be a single state of awareness that is both awareness of oneself *qua* subject of thought and experience and awareness of oneself as a physical object among physical objects. For Longuenesse, this 'single state' view is incoherent: awareness of something *qua* subject is incompatible with that *same* awareness counting as awareness of that same self as an object. The most that her position allows is a view according to which the relation between awareness of oneself as subject and as an object is 'one of conjunction, not one of identity' (2006: 298).

It's not clear, though, that the latter 'conjunctive' view is preferable to the single state view. For it has emerged, on the one hand, that the self-consciousness proper to the thinking subject in the course of her thinking effectively incorporates awareness of the thinking self as persisting and as spatially related to the objects of perceptual-demonstrative thinking. On the other hand, the latter forms of awareness are inseparable from consciousness of oneself as an embodied entity. Consciousness of oneself *qua* thinking subject incorporates consciousness of oneself as an embodied entity. It isn't just that these forms of awareness are simultaneous or somehow run in parallel. They are, at a fundamental level, different aspects of one and the same state or episode of consciousness.

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